

Scopoli, Linnaeus and the Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

by Fabio Barbagli, Fausto Barbagli & Carlo Violani

While examining letters written to Carl Linnaeus (Råshult 1707–Hammarby 1778) by Giovanni Antonio Scopoli (Cavalese 1723–Pavia 1788) now preserved in the Linnean Society's Library, London, and the respective replies published by Cobelli & Delaiti (1889) and recently by Soban (1995), we found interesting details on the nomenclature of some animals including the Edible Dormouse *Myoxus glis* (Violani & Zava 1995) and the Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*. This bird was not included in the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* (1758) probably because being a species foreign to Sweden it was unfamiliar to Linnaeus. Scopoli was a faithful correspondent of Linnaeus. He was employed by the Austrian Imperial Government as a physician to the quicksilver miners of Idria in Carniola (the region around Ljubljana in Slovenia) and his salary was supplemented by the tax money collected on wine sold in the area (Scopoli 1786–1788). Although isolated, Scopoli cultivated interests in many fields of the natural history of Carniola, botanizing, collecting insects and making observations on the local birds, during a long residence in Idria and on his trips through Slovenia and Friuli.

He wanted to send a specimen and communicate first-hand details of the Wallcreeper to Linnaeus so that his Swedish correspondent could include it in a future revised edition of *Systema Naturae*. In a long letter to Linnaeus, dated 28 January 1762, Scopoli announced that he had sent a *Upupa muraria* in a box together with other scientific material. However Linnaeus was unable to find the bird in the consignment when he opened the box, and so noted down on the left margin of Scopoli's letter: "*Hanc non reperi in cistula; certe neglexit imponere Scopoli . . .*" ["I did not find this in the box; certainly Scopoli must have forgotten to put it in . . ."].

On 11 February 1762, the Italian author apologized for his negligence and wrote: "*. . . In cysta, pro Te, Cl. Gronovio missa, non invenies Picum murarium Aldrov . . . Nescio enim quo fato, apud me denuo remanserit, mittam tamen alia vice. Avis haec non est Picus, sed meo iudicio Upupa corpore supra cinereo, gula alba abdomine cauda alisq. nigris: basi remigibusq. primariis semirubris: tribus primis maculis duabus albis . . .*" ["*. . . In the box, sent to you through the celebrated Gronovius, you will not find the Picus murarius of Aldrovandi . . . I do not know by what mischance it remained with me, but I will send it some other way. This bird is not a woodpecker, but in my judgement an Hoopoe, with ash grey upperparts, throat white, belly, tail and wings black with the base of the primaries half-red, the three outer ones with two white spots . . .*"].

At last, with a long letter written by Scopoli on 7 April 1763, Linnaeus received a specimen of the bird accompanied by an accurate description of *Merops murarius*. Scopoli wrote: "*. . . En descriptionem*

Gliris Romanorum et Pici murarii, quibus nonnullas alias observationes adiungo. . . Merops (murarius), cinerascens, rostro abdomine cauda alisque nigris, remigibusque primariis semicoccineis, rectricibus apice albetibus . . . Habitat et nidificat in Arcibus elatioribus et desertis, nec non in turribus . . .” [“Here is the description of the Dormouse of the Romans and of the Wallcreeper, to which I am adding some other observations . . . *Merops murarius*, ashy coloured, bill, abdomen, tail and wings black, the primaries half scarlet, the rectrices white-tipped . . . It inhabits and nests on the higher solitary fortresses, as well as on towers . . .”].

A longer, detailed description followed. This was meticulous when giving body characters, and he obviously had a freshly killed specimen in winter plumage in front of him when writing the letter, since he was able to describe the shape of the nostrils, of the tongue and of the palate. A vivid report of the Wallcreeper's behaviour revealed that Scopoli had observed the bird in life personally: “*Sub finem Autumni migrat solitarius, volatu vago, remigante, muto. Aedificia elatiora, turres et Arces adit, muris insidet, super hos saltitando reptat, fenestras et latebras recognoscit, araneas devorat, muscas segiores capit, inquietus, frigoris amans, numquam pinguescens.*” [“Towards the end of Autumn it migrates alone with a wandering, flapping, silent flight. It visits the higher buildings, towers and fortresses, sits on the walls, creeps on them hopping, explores windows and concealed places, devours spiders, catches the slower flies, restless, loving cold weather and never getting fat”].

On 17 May 1763 an enthusiastic Linnaeus replied from Uppsala, gratefully acknowledging Scopoli's helpful information: “*Epistolam tuam V. A. d. 7 aprilis data rite accepi, . . . perplacuit pulcherrima avis europaea Picus muralis dicta . . .*” [“I have safely received your letter dated 7th April, . . . I liked very much the beautiful European bird called *Picus muralis* . . .”].

Linnaeus included it as a new species under the name of *Certhia muraria* in his 12th edition of *Systema Naturae* (1766), where he acknowledged the information received. Later, Scopoli (1769) published a very similar diagnosis for *Certhia muraria*.

An interesting point concerns the type-locality of *Certhia muraria* Linnaeus 1766. Although briefly mentioning other authors, such as Gesner, Aldrovandi, Kramer and Brisson, Linnaeus clearly relied on Scopoli's contribution for the printed description of the Wallcreeper. Since Scopoli's specimen is stated to originate from Carniola, according to correspondence with Linnaeus, we believe that the Linnean type-locality (“*Habitat in Europae australis turribus, arcibus*”) of *Tichodroma muraria muraria* (L.) can be restricted to Carniola in Slovenia.

Acknowledgements

The Authors wish to express their gratitude to Miss Gina Douglas, Librarian, and to the Linnean Society of London, for their kind permission to study and transcribe the Scopoli-Linnaeus correspondence, held in their care.